

PERFORMING ARTS and KAUTILIYA'S ARTHASASTRA

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Arthasastra, *Dharmasastra* and *Kamasashtra*,¹ though interrelated, look at things quite differently. They observe and analyse manifold human activity from different angles. Being the product of the same social and political system and organisation though they sometimes arrive at a similar conclusion, or react alike to a given situation, the thought process and logic behind differ substantially because of the attitude and the scope of these *Sastra*-sciences.² In all these *Sastras*, we find references to the dramatic arts and performing artists in different contexts. In this article, I desire to examine the attitude of *Arthasastra* towards them. That will help us to understand their social condition, relationship with the State and even their utility to administrative machinery in ancient India.

The first available ancient treatise on the subject is the *Arthasastra* written by that famous political genius Kautilya³ who dethroned the powerful Nanda dynasty and laid the foundations of the Maurya empire. He wrote his book in the fourth century, to be more precise between 321-296 B.C. But the study of the subject must have started much earlier⁴ as Kautilya himself mentions quite a few writers before him (*Purvacharyas*) in the text and in the opening *Shloka* itself says that his book is the 'compendium of almost all the *Arthasastras*' earlier to his and his statement is substantiated by many later writers. It is mainly a treatise on politics and administration, in the words of the author it is a science related to the 'acquisition and maintenance of the earth.'⁵ Hence, naturally we would not find aesthetic appraisal of the *Shilpas*, fine arts or dramatic arts, in the book as in the *Sahityasastras* or *Natyasastras*. He is very practical, sometimes even dry while approaching them. He is unmoved by their aesthetic appeal but practical enough to exploit their utility. He has treated performing artists as any other class of the King's subjects and dispassionately discussed their duties and obligations towards the State. As a class he does extend them few special privileges, limited state patronage but at the same time he is shrewd enough to extract taxes from them to enable the State for these occasional favours.

He entrusts the duty of entertaining people to the lowermost class of society. *Kushilavakarma*, the arts of acting, singing, dancing etc. is their *Dharma*,⁶ sacred duty. That means the dramatic arts basically remained with the common folk. While speaking about it, he is generally pointing at ancient folk theatre. Hence we may safely say that the Kautiliya *Arthashastra* is a good source book to learn about folk dramatic arts of ancient India, or, to be more specific, India under Nanda and Maurya dynasties.

While giving the layout of the fortified city Kautilya says that courtesans (*Rupajia*), dancers (*Talavachar*) etc. should live in the southern quarter of the city or to the south of the royal building.⁷ The implied meaning seems to be that they should live on the southern border of the city. Because at another place he states categorically that King must not allow the *Bahirik* (gamblers, beggars, actors, dancers etc., outsiders, wandering tribes etc.) to settle in the city as they are harmful to *Pura*, *Rastra* and *Janapada*. 'If at all they are to be accommodated they may be settled on the border of the *Janapada* and like other citizens they may also be compelled to pay taxes to the king.'⁸

Kautilya is also strictly against the construction of recreation parks or permanent theatre buildings or 'buildings intended for sports or plays' in the *Janapada*. According to him these activities are harmful to the economy of the state. If the facilities to perform are not available *Nata* (actors), *Nartaka* (dancers), *Gayak* (singers), *Vadaka* (musical instrumentalists), *Vagjivan* (story teller), *Kushilava* (bards) would not be able to disturb farmers and they would constantly be bent upon increasing production.⁹ But this does not mean that Kautilya is unaware of the benefits of recreation and its capacity to refresh the toiling farmer. While discussing the pros and cons of the *Rajavihara* and *Deshvihara* (indulging in pleasures by the King and the people respectively) Kautilya has refuted the opinion of some Acharyas that 'indulgence in the pleasures by country people brings about the destruction of the fruits of works of all three times.' He says, 'Indulgence in pleasures by country people consumes little for the sake of the removal of fatigue caused by work and after consuming leads to application of work once again.' He attacks the view that King's interest in recreational activity benefits actors, singers etc. (*Karushilpi-Kushilavavagjivanrupajiva*). Subjects suffer, he objects, because King indulges in pleasure at the cost of the people.¹⁰

One should be very careful in understanding and interpreting the statements of Kautilya and try to reach their inner meaning. He is not for or against the recreation or entertainment by the performing artists like *Kushilava*, *Plavaka*, *Shoubhika* etc. He wants to emphasise that over indulgence is harmful. Farmers are entitled to recreation but not at the cost of their work. The king has every right to participate in festivals, *utsavas* after fully performing his duties towards his subjects. If he would have been basically against the actor community he would have never advised the king to extend

state patronage to them or to take proper care of them, even the care of their professional training.

The King should organise *Samajotsava*¹¹ and participate in it according to the tradition of conquered people to appease their feelings. *Kushilavas* (actors) should entertain the king with their shows but not those involving weapons, fire or poison for the reason of safety. Their musical instruments should also be kept in the palace itself.¹² because they were found smuggling out secret information by concealing it in them.

In the chapter concerning the salaries of the state employees, *Bhritya-bharaniyam*, Kautilya says that *Kushilava* should get 250 *panas* per year but makers of musical instruments (*Turyakara*) should get double the amount. There is also a provision to pay 1000 *panas* to the narrator of *Puranas* (*Pauranik*) and *Magadha* (Bard) per year¹³ It seems that the King used to give regular employment to these people. Perhaps they might have been attached to his personal staff.

In the *Ganikadhyaksha Prakrana* Kautilya in details writes about *Ganikas* and various kinds of artists. A *Ganika*, young, beautiful and adept in dancing, singing and acting (*Rupayouvanashilpasampanna*) should be appointed on the remuneration of 1000 *Panas* per annum. If her son, at any stage, wanted to regain his liberty, he would be required to pay 12000 *Panas* or he should serve the king for eight years as an actor (*Kushilava*) in his court to acquire his freedom. The price of *Ganika's* freedom from the service of the King is fixed at 24000 *Panas*. Various rules applicable to them are laid down in details and it is stated that same rules are applicable to *Nata*, *Nartaka*, *Gayak*, *Vadak*, *Vagjivan*, *Kushilava*, *Plavaka* (rope dancer), *Saumika* (a juggler), *Charana* (bard).

In the same *Prakarana Ganikadhyaksha* has been instructed to arrange for the professional training for artists earning their living by performing on the stage (*Rangopajivi*).¹⁴ He says that the King should provide the means of livelihood to the person who teaches singing, playing on musical instruments, recitation of dramatic dialogues, dancing, acting, reading, playing on the instruments like *Veena*, *Venu*, *Mridang*, reading the minds of others, manufacture of scents and garlands, art of massage and prostitution to *Ganika*, *Dasi* and actress (*Rangopajivani*). The son of *Ganika* should be made chief of the actors (*Rangopajivi*) and actors expert in *Tala* (*Talavachar*).¹⁵ The State also extends protection to the class of performing artists in various ways. If his (*Kushilava's*) small articles (probably of makeup etc.) are stolen, the thief would be awarded the fine of 100 *Panas* and if they happen to steal their major articles (probably musical instruments, dress and ornaments to be worn on the stage etc.) the fine of 200 *Panas* is prescribed.¹⁶ People are warned against doing verbal injury to actors and their art. They should not slander the learning or art of *Vagjivana* nor they should indulge in making

fun of the profession of *Kushilava*.¹⁷ Kautilya recognises that artists sell their art for money so people should pay them proper remuneration. If *Shilpi*, *Kushilava*, *Vagjivana* perform without fixing remuneration prior to their show, they may be given wages as decided by the experts in the field.¹⁸

The state administration had made a sort of compulsion on the people to contribute money for organising shows or dramatic performances (*Preksha*) in the village. Otherwise 'one who does not contribute his share in a stage show shall not witness it with his people. If he listens to or witness it secretly, he shall perforce give a double share'¹⁹. This shows that people in the village used to contribute to hold shows for their recreation. In some rural parts of India this tradition still lingers and it is usually the head of the village who extends many facilities to the visiting artists. The reputation of the village or the village chief depends upon the amount of remuneration paid to these artists. In Kautilya's time people were free to see plays at night without Police harassment. He says that the City Superintendent should not arrest on suspicion a person found moving in the night if he explains that he had gone to attend dramatic performance (*Preksha*).²⁰ Women were not that free to move about. The husband's permission was necessary to see the play. Even after the refusal of the husband if a wife goes to see a play staged by women artists (*Streepreksha*) in the day-time she should be fined 6 *Panas* as a punishment and the fine should be 12 *Panas* if she visits the show by men (*Purushapreksha*). If she does these things in the night the fine should be doubled.²¹ This throws light on the morality of the day and the position man gained as the head of the family and his powers to curb the freedom of his womenfolk. As far as theatre is concerned we come to know about the shows exclusively put up by the women. We do not know whether only women were admitted to them definitely, but as the sum of fine is less, the show must have been for 'ladies only' and hence Kautilya might have been less harsh about ladies attending shows by ladies while deciding the amount of the fine.

Tax is the basis of state treasury and Kautilya knows for certain the importance of tax. We have earlier seen that though the dancers, actors were given a place to live just on the boundary of the village, Kautilya treated them on par with the other classes of citizens as far as tax was concerned. The performing artists were required to pay tax to the king from their earnings. The tax collected from artists etc. was called *Durga*. Kautilya says, at difficult times, to fill the royal treasury, half of the income of prostitutes (*Rupajiva*) and actors (*Kushilava*) should be taken away as a state tax.²² Kautilya also imposes entertainment tax on shows. He says that the company of performing artists from foreign country performing in the state should pay entertainment tax (*Preksha Vetana*) of five *Panas* per show.²³

Kautilya lays down certain other rules for *Kushilavas*. He states that in the rainy season they should camp at one place in the night and should not

move from there. If they are given excessive reward, far beyond the capacity of the giver, they must not accept it. Nor should they entertain excessive praise of the pleased audience. If they happen to break these rules the fine of twelve *panas* was prescribed.

Bharat, author of *Natyasastra*, prohibits actors from showing certain things²⁴ on the stage. He thinks that these things were aesthetically irritating to the taste of the audience. Some sort of censor seems to be at work even before his times. This is evident if we look into the Chapters of *Arthashastra*. But Kautilya seems to have imposed his restrictions from a social angle. He does not want the actors to hurt the feelings of the people and he has explicitly warned them to avoid making comments on some socially sensitive things.²⁵ He has allowed the actors (*Kushilava*) to perform at any place in the country and entertain the people but they must avoid making fun of country (*Desh*), caste (*Jati*), family (*Gotra*), a certain school of Vedic study (*Charana*) and copulation of men with women.²⁶ 'The same rules shall apply to dancers, dumb players and other mendicants', he says. If any person is hurt by their glib tongue or obscene actions 'magistrate should impose the fine of some *Panas* on them. If they fail to pay the fine they should be beaten at the rate of one lash for one *Pana*, That means if the actor could not deposit the fine of ten *Panas* he would receive ten lashes instead.

In general, it seems that, as a stern administrator, Kautilya does not hold a very good opinion of the actor community. In *Kantakshodhanam Prakarana* he says: 'they are thieves in effect though not in name'. *Kantak* means anti-social element and he has included actors along with many other *Shilpis* in the list of *Kantakas*. At the end of the chapter he says that it is the duty of the king to save the people from the deceit of traders, artisans, actors (*Kushilava*), beggars and magicians (*Kuhak*). He has denounced *Kama* (lust) and *Krodha* (anger) in *Purushavyasana Prakarana*. Because of *Kama*, he says, man falls into bad company of thieves, gamblers, hunters, singers and musicians (*Gayaka, Vadaka*). In the same chapter he compares the vices of drink and women and contradicting the opinion of Vataavyadhi that 'of addiction to women and to drinking, the former is the more serious evil', Kautilya says that drinking is more harmful. Among many other bad effects of drinking one is that he develops intimacy with bad people like singers etc. and develops 'attachment to skill in lute and song' (*Tantri Gita Naipunneshu*). That means drinking leads to the places of bad repute where music and song is available. He says that it leads you to 'indulgence in playing on musical instruments and in singing at the expense of wealth.'²⁷

Being a shrewd politician Kautilya recognised the potentiality of mass entertainers of spying and conducting espionage activity without arousing suspicion. As they move from place to place exhibiting their histrionic skill to the people of all stratas of society they could collect information in foreign lands and also could secretly watch the nefarious moves of high ranking

royal officers like Ministers etc. and report the matter to the King. Among the list of people useful for spying purposes he has included *Nata*, *Nartaka*, *Vadaka*, *Vagjivan* and *Kushilava*. They could be used to keep watch on *Mantri* and other state officers. He has suggested that female spy should enter the inner quarters of the officer's houses as a female artist or singer and send out secret information 'by means of (suggestive) songs, recitations, cipher writings concealed in the musical instruments (*Gitapathyabhandgudhalekha*)' or the spy may enter the house on the pretext of watching the shows of *Kushilavas* and collect necessary information. 'Women artisans, court bards or prostitutes shall, under the pretext of taking in musical instruments or through cipher writings or by means of signs convey the information to its destined place'.²⁸

To watch closely the character and integrity of villagers and village officers like *Gramadhyaksha*, *Charana* (bard), *Kuhak* (magician), *Kartantika* (people showing *Yamapata* etc.) and *Kushilava* (actor) etc. may be employed. They may be entrusted with the task of finding out anti-social elements (*Kantak*) and report their activities to the proper authorities.²⁹ Not only this but *Kushilavas* were also used to watch the pure or impure conduct of armed soldiers.³⁰ Kautilya also utilises the services of the bards to inspire the soldiers to perform brave acts on the battlefield by making them sing in praise of 'caste, corporation, deeds and character of his men.' *Suta* (Masters of History and *Puranas*) and *Magadha* (court bard) should tell stories about how the brave attain heaven and the timid ones hell. In short they should inspire the army by their brave words. And, at the same time, it seems, they were required to keep a watch on the soldiers in the army.³¹

Performing artists were also asked to help the prince kept as hostage in foreign lands to make good his escape. They may dig a secret tunnel for him to escape unnoticed. They should establish themselves in the enemy state and procure the permission of the king to enter his palace and leave it at will. And one day, after the show, they should try to smuggle out the prince along with their musical instruments etc. disguising him as a labourer carrying them. 'Dancers, actors, singers, players on musical instruments, buffoons, court bards, swimmers and *saubhikas*, previously set about the enemy, may continue under his service and may indirectly serve the prince' means, help him to escape. To his usual list of actor performers like *Nata*, *Nartaka* etc. he adds two other names: *Plavaka* (rope walker) and *Saubhika* (One who puts up the show on the stage).³² He also says that women actors, conversant with peculiar signs or code language, may also be used for spying,³³ 'detecting the wicked and murdering or deluding foreign spies'.

Kautilya also uses beautiful dancers to cause a rift in the enemy ranks. Prostitute keepers (*Bandhakiposaka*), *Plavak*, *Nata*, *Nartaka*, *Shaubhika* while performing plays should make the Chiefs of the ruling councils fall

for beautiful young dancers of the troupe and make them quarrel among themselves at the cost of their unity.³⁴

In the first chapter of the eleventh *Adhikarana* Kautilya says that *Aditikaushika* women and dancing and singing girls by their beauty and charm should make *Sanghamukhya*, chief of the *Sangha*, mad about them and then call him to a certain place in the night where a spy called '*Tikshna*' should kill him or kidnap him. There is some difference of opinion about the meaning of the word *Aditikaushika* women. According to some commentators *Aditi* is a woman who earns her living by showing pictures of different gods and goddesses to the people and *Kaushik* woman is a snake charmer. But in his learned article Prof. V. Raghavan (Journal of Oriental Research, Madras, Vol. XV, 1945-46, p. 110-116) says that '*Kaushika striyah*' is a woman of a class or a community devoted to arts of music and dance, toilet etc. employed in the courts and frequently engaged in aiding love affairs.'

People are in a gay and easy mood while attending festivals and shows etc. Security arrangements made for the king grow slack as the attention of the guards is divided between the king and the enchanting show going on the stage or the gay festivity around. Hence Kautilya says that when the king is witnessing a dramatic performance (*Preksha*) or moving in the festivals (*Yatravihare ramate*) he may be slayed³⁵. That is why in the 21st *Prakarana* of the First *Adhikarana* he has cautioned the king not to move about unescorted in the festivals. (*Yatrasamajotsavapravahanani ch dashavargikadhistani gatchhet*). He should be accompanied by a troupe of ten brave soldiers under a Captain on such occasions. As an actor has easy access to the king, Kautilya has suggested to a prince fallen from the grace of the king, to disguise himself as an actor and approach the King to strike him with a weapon or poison.³⁶

The performing artists mentioned above engaged in espionage activity seems to have been in the King's employ and they might have been basically spies trained in the art of histrionics as a part of their profession. There seems to have been really no relationship between the innocent *Nata*, *Nartaka*, *Kushilava*, *Shoubhika* etc. whose profession is pure entertainment and the spies posing as artists.

The attitude of Kautilya towards the performing arts is not that of an art lover or '*Rasika*'. He seldom cares to give any aesthetic appreciation of these arts in his treatise though he mentions them frequently. Only at one place he comes forward forcefully³⁷ in defence of these dramatic arts that too in defiance of a Purvacharya, but there also his attitude is completely utilitarian. Recreation, he says, is necessary for the people because after that they could turn to work more vigorously. We see in the *Jataka* tales that artists used to flock to *Samajja*, a merry festival, full of fun and frolic, dance and drama, to earn money by exhibiting their skill.³⁷ Kautilya also advises the king to organise *Samaj* but of course not for the sake of the artists but for

the sake of the prosperity of the state. He says : The miraculous manifestations of a deity should be arranged and fairs and festivals (*Yatra & Samaj*) started in its honour to provide a source of income to the State.³⁸ Or he wants the king to organise *Samaj* in conquered territory according to the traditions of the local people just to appease their feelings and put up to show how generous and kind the new king is. He is always suspicious of the *Silpis*, artists and artisans, and recommends a strict code of discipline for them. He does provide protection to their trade, sees that people pay remuneration to them properly and do not harm them, even arranges for their professional training but not out of any special love for them but because these are the normal duties of the administrator towards his subjects. All this is natural because Kautilya is not writing a treatise on dramatic arts, he is concerned with politics and administration. He set a stage for political revolution and moved kings like puppets by the strings attached to his fingers in the real drama of life. Though he himself was not much fascinated by the dramatic arts, dramatists were definitely fascinated by his dramatic career and one of them actually made him the hero of his famous play, *Mudrarakshasa*. He might have or might have not loved arts, but his *Arthashastra* remains one of the main sources to know about dramatic arts in ancient India, though from a different angle.³⁹

NOTES:

1. *Artha, Dharma* and *Kama* were three coveted goals of life and were known as *Trivarga*. The most famous and basic works on the subjects are *Arthashastra* by Kautilya, *Manav Dharma Sastra* by Manu and *Kamasutra* by Vatsyayana. *Moksha* was later added to the list and together they were known as four *Purusharthas*, the things the *Purush* (Man) desires most. The twelfth century treatise on dramaturgy *Natya Darpan* by Ramachandra-Gunachandra says that play (*Nataka*) gives the fruits of *Dharma, Kama* and *Artha* (*Dharmakamarthasafalam*). In this context also see *Hindi Natya Darpan*. Ed; Dr. Nagendra, pages 17, 21.
2. For instance, both *Dharmashastra* and *Arthashastra* desire to keep actors etc. at safe distance but former does it on moral and religious grounds, fearing they may bring about the downfall of *Sadhaka* or ascetic; latter do not want them around because they may distract farmers from their routine agricultural operation and that may adversely affect the state treasury.
3. Also known as Chanakya and Vishnugupta. According to *Mahavamsa Tika*, he was from Taksasila, the famous university of ancient India. We find stray information about him in *Vishnu, Vayu* and *Matsya Puranas, Nitisara, Dashakumarcharita, Kadambari*, the drama *Mudraraksasa*, and *Katha Sarit Sagar* of Somadeva.
4. K.P. Jayaswal: Prior to 600 B.C. Dr. D.R. Bhandarkar: 600 B.C. A.S. Altekar '500 B.C. R.P. Kangle: Even before the rise of Buddhism.
5. KA 1.1.1.
6. KA 1.3.8. Manu holds same opinion: Manusmriti 10.100. If Priest acts on the stage his position is downgraded: MS 8.102. However, in difficult times, he may do so, for living: MS 10.116.
7. KA 2.4.9 The word *Talavachar* occurs in *Ramayana* also. *Ta* means *Tandava* and *la* means *lasya*: hence he is a person expert in both the styles of dancing.
8. KA 2.4.32.
9. KA 2.1.33 Dr. R. Shamasastri translates the word *Vagjivan* as *buffoon*.
10. KA 8.4.21. 22, 23.

11. KA 13.5.8 *Samaj* or *Samajja* is a very ancient festival the mention of which is found right from Vedic literature. *Digha Nikaya* (vol. III, p. 183 P.T.S.) mentions its six features: dancing, singing, music, story telling, cymbals & tom-toms'. Also see 'Commentary on Dhammapada' (vol. iv, p. 59, P.T.S). 'Vinaya' (ii, 5.2.6), Kharvela inscription at Udaigiri-Khandagiri caves etc.
12. KA 1.21.16.
13. KA 5.3.15., 16.
14. R.P. Kangle says (*Kautiliya Arthasastra*, Part III, p. 210): It was not necessary for the state to concern itself with the imparting of education, either academic or professional. This does not seem completely true. KA 2.27.28,29
15. See note 7.
16. 4.10.6. *Pana* is a silver coin with silver content roughly equivalent to three quarters of a *tola*: Kangle. KA 2.12.24.
17. 3.8.8.
18. *Kamasashtra* says: Assembly of citizens (*Samaj*) should be convened in the temple of Sarasvati. There the skill of singers (*Kushilava*) and of others who may have come recently to town, should be tasted, and on the following day they should always be given some reward '1.4.16.
19. 3.10.37 KA.
20. KA 2.36.38
21. KA 3.4.22
22. KA 2.6.2 & 5.2.23 Manusmriti expects *Shilpis* (artists and artisans) to 'substitute a day's labour a month for a tax' 7.138.
23. 2.7.26 KA
24. KA 4.1.60. See *Natyasastra* and other works on dramaturgy and literary criticism for the list of things not to be shown on the stage.
25. 4.1.60 KA
26. There is a difference of opinion about the translation. According to Kangle: 'They (actors) may at will entertain by making fun of the customs of the country, castes, families, schools and love affairs.' Dr. Shamasastri says 'They may hold their performances to their liking in accordance with the procedure of their country, caste, family, profession or copulation. I have accepted the translation given by Ramtej Sastri Pandeya and Vachaspati Gairola.
27. KA 8.3.15 & 58. Manu says: (The king) should banish from the city, along with other bad elements, men who manufacture spirituous liquor, dancers, singers etc.
28. KA 1.12 9/13.
29. KA 4.3
30. KA 5.3.47
31. KA 10.3.43.
32. KA 7.17.33 to 39: Also see 'The Ocean of Story' Vol. I. page: 136-7. Here Yangan-dharayana & Varantaka transform themselves into Vidusaka and dancer to arrange the escape of King Udayana who was captivated by King Chandamdasena.
33. KA 2.27.30
34. KA III.34.
35. KA 13.3.34 & 18.2.II. Suggesting a stratagem to draw out the enemy king out of his fort, Kautilya says that an ascetic should be sent to him to advice that the king should stay out with him for seven days arranging and enjoying festivals with shows (*Preksha-pravahanapurva Vastavva*) and then kill him.
36. 1.8.12.
37. *Padakusal Manavaka Jatak*, *Kanavera Jataka* etc.
38. 5.2.38 to 45.
39. The author is greatly indebted to the translations of *Kautiliya Arthasastra* by Dr. Shamasastri, R.P. Kangle, MA, Ramtejsastri Pandeya, T. Ganapati Sastri, Vachaspati Gairola.